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Operation Overflight

Pilot's Orders: Talk If Downed

(Second of a Series)

By FRANCIS GARY POWERS

Not long after the installation of the "granger," the intelligence officer introduced us to another piece of "equipment."

We couldn't figure it out. It looked like a good-luck charm. It seemed to be an ordinary silver dollar with a metal loop at one end so it could be fastened onto a key chain or a chain around the neck.

Never Carried Cyanide

Obviously enjoying our puzzlement, he unscrewed the loop. Inside the dollar was what appeared to be an ordinary straight needle, only again not an ordinary needle. Toward the end there were grooves. Inside the grooves was a sticky brown substance.

It was curare, the intelligence officer explained. Just one prick would suffice.

From now on, we could carry this, if we wanted to, instead of cyanide.

The majority of pilots had decided against carrying cyanide. I had never carried it.

But we were fascinated with the dollar-pin-needle device. Passing it around, quite carfully, leaving the needle in the sheath, we each examined it. It was ingenious. Who would ever think of looking inside a silver dollar for something like this?

We were champing at the bit. Most of 1958, all of 1959, and thus far in 1960, there had been a drastic reduction in the number of overflights. Months would pass without one. Although never told the reason for the severe cutback, we presumed it was because of the political climate.

We were quite capable of making many more flights than was the case, in fact were anxious to do so. We were not inactive; we continued to make

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border-surveillance missions and "special" missions, but were definitely restive. The longer the layoff, the greater the tension. The fewer the overflights, the more apprehensive we became about the next one.

Then, suddenly, two flights were scheduled for the same month, April, 1960.

Picked to Fly

I was to be "backup" on the first and to fly the second.

The backup pilot was simply a substitute for the lead pilot in the event he was unable to fly.

It was some weeks prior to the first April flight, when we were studying routes, that I finally asked the question.

It had been put off much too long. There had been no mention of it in our contracts. It had never been brought up in our briefings. We had never discussed it among ourselves. Yet I knew we had thought about it — or, at least, I knew one pilot had.

Though Operation Overflight was nearly four years old, we were totally unprepared for an "accident." It didn't necessarily have to be a missile. One loose screw, in just the right place, could bring an aircraft down.

Asks Intelligence Officer

The silver dollar had provided the obvious opening, and I had presumed someone would ask it then. But no one had done so. Now, as we were preparing to resume overflights, I decided to put it directly to the intelligence officer.

"What if something happens and one of us goes down over Russia? That's an awfully big country, and it could be a hell of a long walk to a border. Is there anyone there we can contact? Can you give us any names and addresses?"

"No, we can't."

While it was not what I wanted to hear, his answer was at least understandable. If we had agents in Russia as we presumably did, release of their names could place them in jeopardy also.

What About the Worst?

I persisted. "All right, say the worst happens. A plane goes down, and the pilot is captured. What story does he use? Exactly how much should he tell?"

His exact words were, "You may as well tell them everything, because they're going to get it out of you anyway."

During April, 1960, we were aware of the upcoming Summit conference, scheduled to take place in Paris, the following month; like other topics of the day, we discussed the talks, hopeful that something good would come out of them. But not optimistic. There still seemed to be no solution to the problem of Berlin; according to everything we read, Khrushchev was determined to make trouble over the issue.

But it was a minor topic. We were equally interested in Sen. John F. Kennedy's win over Hubert Humphrey in the Wisconsin Presidential primary; de Gaulle's visit to the United States; the orbiting of a navigational satellite from Cape Canaveral. We didn't connect it with our work or with the sudden increase in the number of overflights.

Own Explanation

We had our own explanation for that.

No one told us this, it was just a presumption, but we had a feeling that intelligence, suspecting the Russians were close to solving their missile-guidance problem, was trying to crowd in as many important targets as possible while time remained.

The feeling, correct or not, didn't lessen the tension.

However, the first April flight, on the 10th, went off as smoothly as its predecessors.

There was no reason to suppose that mine, scheduled for late in the month, would go otherwise. Yet we were a little more apprehensive about it than usually would have been the case, since it would differ from all previous overflights in one respect.

Taking off from Peshawar, Pakistan, I was to fly 3,800 miles to Bodo, Norway.

It would be the first time we had attempted to fly all the way across the Soviet Union.

NEXT: A last-minute change in plans proves disastrous.

From the book "Operation Overflight" by Francis Gary Powers and Curt Gentry. Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. (C) 1970 by Francis Gary Powers and Curt Gentry.